

Portrayal of Women in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal has a feminist attitude in the novel, *Rich Like us*. Her female characters are strongly portrayed and the effects of Emergency on them are focused upon. Sonali finds herself in the line with other victims – Rose who had accepted her husband, Ram's first marriage, and Mona his second; she is like her great grandmother who had submitted to death in the form of 'Sati' unable to withstand social and economic pressures. The novel operates simultaneously on two levels, the literal and the figurative or symbolic. In the novel there is an uneven division of power between the sexes. In the present patriarchal set-up, man is not merely the master of his own life, he also creates woman's destiny. The details of women's exploitation in the Indian society are revealed at several levels besides the experience of female protagonists. Nayantara Sahgal points out how politics of Emergency encroaches on the right to life and security of women.

Key words: Emergency, women, feminism, politics

Nayantara Sahgal has a feminist attitude in the novel, *Rich Like us*. Her female characters are strongly portrayed and the effects of Emergency on them are focused upon. The Emergency period started overnight.

Sonali is an IAS officer, who has grown up in an idealistic world. She is unable to accommodate herself to the new requirements of Emergency. She rejects the application for the setting up of the imported Happyola drink factory by Dev and Neuman, supported by the Minister of Industry, purely on economic grounds. Whereas, Sonali is demoted as she is unable to accommodate herself to the new requirements of Emergency. She is demoted and transferred out of Delhi. She is unable to discard the values she inherited. We find through Sonali that the civil servants knew it

was no Emergency but no one dares to protest and if one protests, one gets punished like Sonali under article 309. She suffers multiply as she gets harassed as a bureaucrat, a woman and a common citizen.

Sonali finds herself in the line with other victims – Rose who had accepted her husband, Ram's first marriage, and Mona his second; she is like her great grandmother who had submitted to death in the form of 'Sati' unable to withstand social and economic pressures. Ram is not dead but is lying upstairs paralysed after having suffered a stroke. His paralytic condition symbolizes the policy paralysis of the government affairs during Emergency. He is helpless.

The novel focuses on the female characters and their sufferings centering upon the fate of two upper - class females, Rose and

Sonali. Rose struggles to find a sense of home in the Indian society, filled with ancient customs, including Sati and male domination. As Ram's health deteriorates, she realizes her rights as a wife are in question. Dev schemes to take all Ram's assets by disposing off Rose. In fear, Rose turns to Sonali, her friend and niece.

The novel operates simultaneously on two levels, the literal and the figurative or symbolic. At the literal level, the novel is the story of Emergency as seen from the viewpoint of two main characters, Rose and Sonali. The novel is a sustained allegory of modern India, especially of its relationship with Britain. The major characters carry symbolic meanings and their life has impact of politics. Their destinies along with that of the common man are framed by the contemporary politics. The following analysis of major characters will show that:

Rose is that part of Britain which came to India and became a part of it. Her love for India and Ram may be a bit of a mystery; why she puts up with so much abuse from Ram is also not clear. She belongs to the working class and is compassionate. She is the political symbol of the 'good' West and liberal values and this is what Indian culture might benefit from. The name 'Rose' itself suggests the goodness within the West.

Marcella is clearly aligned with imperialism; her interest in Indian things is a sort of 'Orientalism.' She is an upper class English beauty, sophisticated and ageless. She represents the ruling classes. Her affair with Ram symbolises the selling out of Indian interests by our leaders. She is like the British upper classes turning collaborators of India after independence.

Ram is India trapped between the past and the present, tradition and modernity, India and the West. He is aligned to traditional India (Mona) and Western modernity (Rose). He is a male bigamist, insensitive and an intellectual. He represents aristocracy, morally corrupt, hypocritical oppressor of women and the Indian tradition at its worst.

Ram's father, Lalaji represents the good, uncompromising, older generation and the real Indian tradition in a sense. Rose and Lalaji together build up the fortunes of the family after partition. This means that the new Indian state is built upon the foundations of the real Indian tradition and modernity learnt from the British.

Mona represents traditional and devoted Indian womanhood, a looser and sufferer, a victim and an affectionate mother who spoils Dev. She is never treated as an equal by Ram. She is loyal, devoted, stubborn, religious, irrational and superstitious.

Sonali is a combination of Indian tradition and modernity. She is aware of the evil in traditional Hinduism because of the 'Sati' of her great-grandmother.

We find Sonali's grandmother being a victim of 'Sati' during colonialism when the practice of 'Sati' was rampant and nobody found anything wrong about it. We find the female characters like Rose, Sonali, Mona and Nishi are persuaded to accept the patriarchy and atrocities of Emergency. They become in a way subaltern where there is double imposition of sufferings first, as women, they are considered inferior and then they suffer the violence of Emergency.

In the modern era, though practicing Sati is a crime, it is practised in various versions. In

the novel, we find Rose's death to be a modern version of Sati. Sonali's remaining single points to the deficiency in modern Indian manhood. Ravi's failure to measure up to her is the failure of the Indian men in general.

Nishi belongs to the lower middle class and is a child of the Partition. She accepts the lies of Emergency for personal benefit but is betrayed by it in her father's arrest. Her zeal to support Emergency is motivated by self-interest and greed; this shows the apathy of the ruling classes and their willingness to ruin the nation for personal gains. She takes an active interest in sterilization programme, bundling every man in the household into the van that would take them to the vasectomy camp. Through her, Sahgal has shown how a strong-willed woman's love for her family could make her a pathetic supporter of an unjust social and political system. She even studiously avoids talking about politics.

India becomes dominated by diseases, poverty, injustice, oppression, religious superstitions, communalism, casteism, bigamy, sati, rape, torture, violation of civil rights, corrupt politicians and bureaucrats, greedy and callous socialites, exploitative ruling classes, crushed and defeated masses. The novel does have a ray of hope. Sonali faces the injustices bravely and it symbolizes that the Emergency will end after all.

The novel is rich in political parallels. 'The Madam' in the novel who has brought in the Emergency is Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the son who uses the official power to produce small car project is Sanjay Gandhi.

In the novel there is an uneven division of power between the sexes. In the present patriarchal set-up, man is not merely the master of his own life, he also creates woman's destiny. With a wife and a newly born infant back home in India, Ram is still free to court Rose in England. When he realizes that he cannot use Rose as a past time, he starts building an "emotional labyrinth"¹ around Rose, "erecting a world around her, drawing her deep into it, the door shutting, Rose inside."² Once he is confident that Rose is in deep love with him, he announces that he has a wife and a son in India. Totally insensitive to Mona's anguish, he marries Rose, never thinks legal or religious. Wives for Ram are things to be used and not discarded but kept aside for future needs. Mona is useful as the mother to his son Dev and as manager of the household while Rose is good as a mistress childless wife, showering love and attention on Ram.

When Ram meets Marcella, he lightly discards Rose as he had earlier discarded Mona. Rose endlessly wishes for Mona's death. Mona takes the drastic step of attempting suicide; constant agony pushes Rose to the verge of madness. Mona is dying of cancer but Ram does not have time even to listen about it. He is too busy to the woes of another woman, Marcella. Ram proudly passes on his legacy to Dev,

"A man has to get his experience somewhere."³

This is Ram's response to Rose when she informs him about Dev abducting girls from Miranda House and taking them to private rooms at the Ashoka.

Mona at one stage is given a separate flat to live as an “honourably retired wife”⁴ and later Rose is made to live separately for five years without even given a reason or an explanation. Ram is selfish enough to keep her available for use at his own convenience.

The details of women’s exploitation in the Indian society are revealed at several levels besides the experience of female protagonists. The narrative is full of reminders of injustices and violence done to women, for example, the armless beggar’s account of the atrocities on women committed by police and disappearance of his own wife, who, like many others, must have fell prey to the lust of brick-kiln owners.

Nayantara Sahgal points out how politics of Emergency encroaches on the right to life and security of women. The women become pawns at the hands of gender politics. It covers not only the women but the entire society; from limbless beggar to Ravi Kachru, from the young one – time Marxist student to Kishori Lal. The only exception is Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Only she is a dominating and autocratic ruler who rules India with an iron hand. Her administration has ruined the life of individuals.

Rose represents the working - class and therefore possesses wisdom accompanied by innocence. Rose functions as the mirror of Indian middle-class life. The white working class Cockney eventually becomes the epitome of traditional, middle- class Hindu wifehood; submissive and devoted to her husband, she even acquires the status of, to quote Nayantara Sahgal, “a modern- day suttee.”⁵ When Dev finally murders her because she hinders his inheritance and

knows too much about his political corruption.

Sonali speaks about the attitude of the civil services towards the Emergency:

“We knew this was no Emergency. If it had been the priorities would have been quite different. We were all taking part in a thinly disguised masquerade, preparing the stage for family rule. And we were involved in a conspiracy of silence, which is why we were careful not to do more than say hello when we passed each other in the building and not to talk about our work after hours, which made after – hours sessions very silent indeed. No one wanted trouble. As long as it didn’t touch us, we played along, pretending the Empress’ new clothes were beautiful. To put it charitably, we were being realistic.”⁶

However, the period of illness gives Sonali the time to clarify her thoughts and on recovery she resigns from her job. It is her way of asserting her value- system and her ideals. Sonali now understands what her father had meant when reacting to the imposition of the Emergency, he had warned her that:

“... history would now be revised and rewritten. All dictatorships meddled with history.”⁷

There are two different narrative techniques being used alternately and two main figures for narration, Sonali and Rose. They relate despite the differences of age, upbringing and nationalities.

The second narrative is a small manuscript written by Sonali’s grandfather in 1915. It is a record of the practice of ‘Sati’ in India during the nineteenth century. It catalogues six cases of ‘Sati’ reported after its abolition

in 1829 and concludes with a very painful account of his mother's involuntary death as a 'Sati.' The importance of this narrative is that it is the only document that tells the tale of a woman murdered to deprive her of her husband's money. The official version of her husband's relatives had been that like a noble Hindu wife "she had sacrificed herself ... on the altar of sati."⁸

The third narrative is by Sonali. It records the brutal murder of Rose for money. The official version provided by Dev is that Rose had fallen into an unused well when she had gone for a walk after- dinner in an absolutely dark state. Unable to accept their version, Sonali hunts for truth about her death and reconstructs it carefully in her narrative because as she says,

"Here in this (Dev's) house the revision of history had begun and there would be no end to the lies."⁹

Significantly, the novel concludes with Sonali studying the history of seventeenth century Indian art as a way of retaining her inner harmony during the period of Emergency. This could be interpreted as escapism from reality since during Emergency everyone was trying to escape from the truth that it was no Emergency at all but a fake demonstration of Emergency. Everybody has the freedom to find peace and even Emergency has not trampled this right. Sonali finds it in ancient art, Nishi in flattering the Prime Minister and supporting her husband, Rose in helping the limbless beggar.

System has not crushed the spirit of the people. Sonali is an epitome of hope in the novel who symbolizes that a good change is at hand. Sonali is afraid that the whole nation may be overtaken by cowardice. Though Rose is killed silently, individual resistance surfaces. Sonali helps the beggar to safety. Sonali's problem is how to cope up with the hypocrisy, red – tape and corruption that have crept into the Indian Administrative Service. Her decision to resign from the Civil Service is her refusal to compromise with dictatorship. Sonali says:

"When the Constitution becomes null and void by the act of a dictator, and the armour of a modern state confronts you, 'Satyagraha' is the only way to keep your self – respect."¹⁰

Sonali's resignation from the IAS implies that there is no place for an honest and law-abiding officer in the new regime. Even Ravi Kachru at the end is a disillusioned man thrown out of favour only because he has pleaded for Rose.

The novel ends on an unambiguous note of optimism, reminding Sonali that she is young and alive, with her own century stretched out before her waiting to be lived.¹¹

Such an approach to the past and the present highlights the fact that the spirit of India is too powerful to be overwhelmed by trials like Emergency and it will arise like phoenix to discover its richness and legacy.

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